

**A CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEY FOR THE
NORTH PORT FIRE RESCUE DISTRICT**

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

BY: Chris Krajic
North Port Fire Rescue District
North Port, Florida

An applied research project submitted to the National Fire Academy
as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program

January 2001

Appendix C Not Included. Please visit the Learning Resource Center on the Web at <http://www.lrc.fema.gov/> to learn how to obtain this report in its entirety through Interlibrary Loan.

ABSTRACT

The City of North Port Fire Rescue District has never had a formal method to collect and measure customer satisfaction with the emergency services they provide. Feedback was limited to complimentary letters, letters of concern, or telephone calls and was entirely customer generated.

The purpose of this research paper was to determine the benefits of obtaining customer feedback, identify the various methods to receive customer feedback, and to develop a system appropriate for use in the North Port Fire Rescue District.

An action research methodology was used to answer the following questions:

1. What are the benefits of obtaining customer feedback?
2. What methods do other fire departments utilize to obtain customer feedback?
3. What method should the North Port Fire Rescue District use to obtain customer feedback?

Research was gathered from numerous authors and fire service professionals that emphasized the importance of receiving feedback from the customer. The benefits identified included understanding customer needs and expectations, the ability to positively address complaints, effective resource management, financial rewards, increased customer loyalty, and to implement new programs.

Sample customer service surveys were received from six fire departments

throughout the country. The format and content of the surveys was reviewed and they were all found to be relatively short and easy to complete. All were mailed to the customer within two weeks of the date of service and included a no-cost method of return to the fire department.

The information gathered through this research will be used to develop a method to obtain customer feedback for the North Port Fire Rescue District. A simple survey, mailed to the customer within two weeks of service, with a no-cost method of return is the format recommended for implementation by the North Port Fire Rescue District.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	4
INTRODUCTION.....	5
BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE.....	6
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	7
PROCEDURES.....	12
RESULTS.....	14
DISCUSSION.....	16
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	17
REFERENCES.....	19
APPENDIX A.....	20
APPENDIX B.....	22
APPENDIX C.....	24

INTRODUCTION

One of the few similarities between the fire service and private business is that neither can survive without customers. Most successful businesses have learned that their survival depends upon knowing what their customers need and the level of service they expect. The same now holds true for the fire service. The citizen customer of today has come to expect a high level of service and professionalism for their tax dollar.

The fire service has enjoyed a unique relationship with its customers in that there has been little competition for the services provided. The fire service has for years provided what it perceives to be what the customer wants. Until recently, there has been a minimal effort applied to finding out just what the customer's needs really are. Privatization and consolidation are two reasons fire departments need to ensure that they continue to provide effective service to their customers.

The problem is that the North Port Fire Rescue District has never had a method to collect and measure customer satisfaction with the emergency services they provide. The purpose of this research project is to develop a means to collect data and determine customer satisfaction.

Action research methodology will be used to address the following research questions:

1. What are the benefits of obtaining customer feedback?

2. What methods do other fire departments utilize to obtain customer feedback?
3. What method should the North Port Fire Rescue District use to obtain customer feedback?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

In today's competitive marketplace only those businesses addressing the needs of the customer will prosper. "Business calls this "niche marketing". It's what's done to meet the needs of all the different types of customers. How does the private sector know? They ask the customer" (Drumm, 2000, p. 27). The same now holds true for today's fire departments. "We must be able to deliver "world-class" quality fire, emergency medical, rescue, and hazmat -control services to our community" (Rubin, 1999, p. 68). Because the perception of "world-class quality" may differ between the provider and the recipient, customer feedback is important to ensure the services provided are what the customer expects. Kinoshita (1999) writes:

The fire service must pay more attention to the needs of its citizens. In other words, fire departments will have to commit to effective customer service. By identifying the needs of the customer, and then developing cost effective programs and services to meet those needs, fire departments will demonstrate to its citizens that they are responsive and provide efficient and effective services.

(p. 5)

The North Port Fire Rescue District is a growing fire department located in Southwest Florida. With this growth comes increased call volume, additional personnel and facilities, and the need for assessment increases. This growth also highlights the importance of knowing that we are meeting the need of our citizens.

The North Port Fire Rescue District does not have a formal customer feedback system in place to evaluate the services of the Emergency Operations Division. The only feedback received is limited to complimentary letters, letters of concern, or telephone calls, all of which are customer generated. There is currently no method to gather data to measure customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction on a regular basis.

This project was prepared as a required component of the Executive Development course in the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program. The problem addressed by this research project relates specifically to Unit 10 titled *Service Quality/Marketing*. In this unit of instruction, emphasis was placed on the need to address quality, service quality, and the customer. It is anticipated that the recommendations resulting from this research will also be helpful to other fire departments in the development of a customer service survey.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to review and summarize research relating to customer satisfaction surveys. Research resources were obtained through a literary search of the Learning Resource Center of the National Fire Academy and the

Sarasota County (FL) Public Library system. Information from business and marketing texts, trade journals, and Applied Research Projects for the National Fire Academy were utilized.

Published Literature

The concept of customer feedback in the business environment has been employed for decades. There have been volumes written about the benefits of not only obtaining customer feedback but also utilizing it for maximum profitability.

Wing (1997) writes of transforming listening into a more formal process:

In organizations of every kind, size and description, an important priority today is to listen to customers, try to understand what it is they are saying and then formulate an effective course of action. According to Peters (1988), "Listening to customers must become everyone's business. With most competitors moving ever faster, the race will go to those who listen and respond most intently". (p. 26).

Zemke and Woods (1998) discuss the importance of closed-loop communications which allows information to flow both ways - to and from the customer. "Customers are proactively asked about their service expectations and requirements. They are encouraged to offer ideas, comments, and suggestions....Customers appreciate being asked and listened to, and tend to reward closed-looped communications with loyalty." (Scheuing, p. 30)

Zemke and Woods (1998) later write of the importance of understanding customers' requirements to deliver great customer service:

Often organizations claim to know their customers' requirements, yet they've never taken the time to do a really thorough analysis. Sure, they probably know their customers' general requirements. But do they know what's really important to their customers, how they measure up relative to the important factors, and how they compare with the competition in the areas most important to the customer? In most cases they don't-and they won't unless they collect this information in a formal systematic manner. (Smith, p. 59)

Another beneficial yet unwelcome form of customer feedback is the customer complaint. Barlow and Moller (1996) discuss this with:

After we have worked hard to deliver a service or a product, customers have the gall to let us know our efforts do not suit their purposes or meet their needs. Are we to welcome these kinds of statements and confrontational behaviors? Yes. That is precisely the point. To use Marshall McLuhan's words, the *medium* may be a complaint. Customers may moan and groan—seemingly unfairly—but their *message* is vital information to any business. (p. 1)

In referencing customer complaints as valuable feedback Zemke and Woods (1998) summarize:

So it is essential to encourage and welcome complaints instead of treating them as unjustified nagging or evil influences. A customer who complains offers an organization a chance to correct an alleged faulty performance or set the record

straight by educating the customer about the true nature of the situation.

(Scheuing, p. 33)

In summarizing customer complaints Barlow and Moller (1996) discuss their value. "One of the most direct and meaningful ways customers can express their dissatisfaction to companies is through what we have come to call a complaint. Too bad we didn't start by calling it "customer feedback." (p. 3).

Today's fire departments are finally beginning to understand the importance of utilizing customer feedback to provide effective service. "The newest and maybe the greatest change to crash into our business is the notion of "customer service." Your author predicts that fire history books will record the "90s as the era of customer service enlightenment" (Rubin, 1999, p. 68). This concept, developed and proven to be successful in the business environment, has now found its way into the fire service.

Marcucci (2000) emphasizes the importance of customer feedback in the fire service:

Determining customer satisfaction and need is the cornerstone of "community fire servicing" as currently practiced in San Rafael. Understanding how the fire department is perceived by its "customers", and taking notice of both positive and negative opinions is essential to continuing to serve the community well. (p. 16)

The Phoenix (AZ) Fire Department utilizes customer feedback to provide

direction and enhance their service delivery. “Simply, if you don’t learn to read the map and listen to the natives as you go along, it’s pretty easy to get lost and stay lost, or to not know where you are when you arrive where you are” (Brunacini, 1996, p.2).

Positive public perception, effective resource management, and increased funding opportunities are some of the benefits of utilizing customer feedback to improve service. Rubin (1999) states:

Further, the results are formally presented to our governing body and the local media at a city commission meeting. This reporting process has been a valuable tool in securing and maintaining departmental resource....The negative responses are not viewed as a failure or a problem, but as an opportunity for improvement. Several changes have been made to various programs solely based on customer input. (p. 69)

Another benefit of customer feedback is the positive effect it can have on personnel within the organization. Marcucci (2000) writes:

A customer service survey gives a clear, explainable indication of how the customer base feels about the fire department. Positive comments and high ratings enhance the department’s image. They also encourage personnel to keep up the good work....These result in better service to the community and, ultimately, a more-positive customer perception of the fire department. (p. 17)

Other Findings

Survey formats were obtained from various fire departments during the research process. These surveys were utilized for ideas and information during the development process of a survey for the North Port Fire Rescue District. Surveys were received from: Sarasota County Fire Department, Florida, Prince William County Department of Fire and Rescue, Virginia, Coral Gables Fire Rescue, Florida, Dothan Fire Department, Alabama, San Rafael Fire Department, California, and Altamonte Springs Fire Department, Florida. Examples of these surveys are found in Appendix C.

Summary

The literature review provided valuable information on the benefits of obtaining customer feedback. The authors emphasized the importance of listening to the customer and utilizing their feedback to improve products and services provided. This material will be used by the North Port Fire Rescue District to develop and administer a customer service survey.

PROCEDURES

The first step in this project was to compile and review information on the subject of customer feedback. This material was found at the North Port Public Library, Selby Public Library, North Port Fire Rescue District library, and the Learning Resource Center at the National Fire Academy. The information was reviewed and found to be relevant to the project.

Following the review, the focus was then narrowed to determine the value of obtaining customer feedback and methods to obtain this feedback. The authors provided many valuable benefits of obtaining customer feedback and identified a written survey as the most effective means to collect feedback from the customer .

Examples of customer service survey forms were obtained from six fire departments throughout the country. These materials were utilized in the development of a customer service survey form for use in the North Port Fire Rescue District. This survey form will be reviewed by administrative staff for suggestions. Following this review, the survey form will be forwarded to the Chief of the Fire Rescue District for his approval.

The surveys will be mailed to all city residents who experience a medical or fire emergency within two weeks of the date of service. Information obtained from these surveys will be reviewed by administrative staff for evaluation of current and future service delivery methods and customer satisfaction with services provided. This information will then be shared with the personnel who provided the service. Finally, the results will be forwarded to the Fire Chief in the quarterly operations report. This same information will be included in the Fire Rescue quarterly report to the City Manager.

The survey process will be reviewed quarterly to determine the effectiveness of this program. This review will evaluate survey return percentage and relevance of the questions, which will be based upon customer response to the questions.

RESULTS

The results for this applied research project began with an examination of the material from the literature review. This information combined with survey samples obtained from other fire departments and marketing texts provided sufficient information to answer the research questions.

Answers to Research Questions

Research Question 1. What are the benefits of obtaining customer feedback? .

Obtaining customer feedback enables businesses to identify customer needs and expectations, address complaints, and remain competitive. Successful businesses that utilize customer feedback enjoy effective resource management, increased profits, and customer loyalty. Zemke and Woods (1998) provide an excellent summary of the benefits of customer feedback when they write:

Customer service is meeting the needs and expectations of the customer as defined by the customer. "Meeting the needs and expectations of the customer" means you know what your customers want and what they expect, and you provide that to them on a consistent basis. And to know what your customers want, you've got to ask them!

As obvious as that may sound, many companies establish customer service initiatives without ever talking to their customers. "As defined by the customer" is a very important point to get because it says that if the customer doesn't perceive you as offering good customer service, then you aren't. The customer is the judge here. No matter how good your internal records claim you

are, the customer is the only voice worth listening to. So in order to have an effective customer service initiative, you must know what your customers want, provide it to them consistently, and ask them how you're doing. (Smith, p. 55)

Customer feedback enables a business to identify what is important to its customers and to ensure that their customer's expectations are being met. In doing so, customer loyalty is established which leads to increased profitability. Although fire departments are not in business to make a profit, they must still be financially responsible to their customers, the citizens they serve. By knowing what their customers want and expect, they are able to provide a cost effective service. Utilization of customer feedback then allows fire departments to evaluate operational procedures for effectiveness, provide feedback to their employees, and can also help justify additional funding for new programs, equipment, and personnel.

Research Question 2. What methods do other fire departments utilize to obtain customer feedback?

Sample customer service surveys were collected from six fire departments throughout the country. Information contained in these surveys was utilized in the development of a survey for the North Port Fire Rescue District. The most effective distribution method identified is through the US mail service. Included with the survey is a pre-addressed, postage-paid envelope for return to the fire department. It is recommended that the survey be distributed as soon as possible.

Research Question 3. What method should the North Port Fire Rescue District use to obtain customer feedback?

Utilizing information from the literature review and from other fire departments, a written customer survey has been developed. This survey will be mailed to city residents who have experienced a medical or fire emergency requiring the services of the North Port Fire Rescue District. The survey will be mailed to the resident within two weeks of the date of service and will include a pre-addressed, postage-paid envelope for return to the District.

DISCUSSION

The decision to do this research project came from the need to determine the effectiveness of the Operations Division of the North Port Fire Rescue District. The author felt it necessary to evaluate the operational procedures of the Fire Rescue District to determine their effectiveness and to see if they were meeting the needs and expectations of the citizens.

Research has shown the importance of asking the customer as the most effective way to measure and improve performance. This is best emphasized by Brunacini (1996) when he writes "Two days later, our department automatically sends Mrs. Smith a customer service evaluation card that asks her to evaluate our performance. She indicates that we were prompt, effective, and nice" (p. 106). Chief Brunacini continues with:

The Battalion Chief conducts a (routine) coffee-table critique of the event and thanks them for their efforts and positive customer response. The troops suggest that smaller pieces of black plastic would be less cumbersome...and that a

battery-operated drywall saw would be quicker and cleaner than a manual dry wall saw. The system (bosses) was accessible, open, and supportive of making changes that will improve our performance. (p. 107)

This example of the Phoenix Fire Department's customer feedback policy provides an excellent example of how customer feedback is utilized to ensure customer satisfaction and evaluate their operational policies.

Following an evaluation of the customer service surveys received from other fire departments, a draft customer service survey was developed for the North Port Fire Rescue District (Appendix A). In addition to the survey form, a policy for distribution, evaluation, and reporting of findings has also been developed (Appendix B).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The author strongly recommends that the survey and policy developed as a result of this research project be used to implement a customer satisfaction survey program for the North Port Fire Rescue District. This system will be utilized to evaluate both customer satisfaction and the operational effectiveness of the Operations Division of the North Port Fire Rescue District.

It is recommended that the results of the surveys be distributed monthly to line personnel so that they can be aware of how well the public perceives their emergency scene performance. These results will also be included in the quarterly operations report to the Fire Chief and in the Fire Rescue District's quarterly report to the City Manager.

It is recommended that the results of the surveys be used to modify existing or develop new operational procedures as identified through feedback from the customer. Any changes will be subject to an evaluation of the benefit(s) to the District and a review of any financial impacts.

Implementation of this program by the North Port Fire Rescue District will provide an excellent foundation for meeting the needs and expectations of its customers. In doing so, the District will be able to provide the most effective service possible for both the present and future residents of North Port.

REFERENCES

Barlow, Janelle and Moller, Claus. (1996). *A complaint is a gift*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Brunacini, Alan V. (1996). *Essentials of fire department customer service*. Stillwater, OK: Fire Protection Publications.

Drumm, H. Michael. (2000, October). When In Doubt, Try Asking The Customer. *Fire Chief*, 26-27.

Kinoshita, Craig. (1999). *A Customer Satisfaction Survey for the Orange County Fire Authority*. (Executive Fire Officer Research Paper 29100). Emmitsburg, MD: National Fire Academy.

Marcucci, Robert E. (2000, September). Do You Know How Well Your Fire Department Is Doing?. *American Fire Journal*, 16-17.

Rubin, Dennis L. (1999, February). Customer Service, Southern Style. *Firehouse*, 68-69.

Wing, Michael J. (1997) *Talking with your customers*. Chicago, IL: Dearborn Financial Publishing Inc.

Zemke, Ron and Woods, John A. (1998). *Best practices in customer service*. New York, NY: HRD Press.

APPENDIX A

City of North Port Fire Rescue District
3001 North Port Blvd.
North Port, Florida, 34286
941-423-4353

You recently requested the services of the North Port Fire Rescue District for a fire or medical emergency. In an effort to provide the best possible service, we are asking for your assistance. Please take a moment of your time to complete and return the following survey. A pre-addressed, postage-paid envelope has been provided for your convenience. Thank you.

Michael J. Auclair, Fire Chief

**Please rate the following on a scale of 1 to 5,
1 being the lowest score and 5 being the highest.**

	Quality of Service					Importance to Me				
The 911 operator was prompt and courteous.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
The Fire District response time was prompt.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
The Fire Rescue District personnel were professional and caring.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Were the emergency procedures explained to you?	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
The personal appearance of the Fire Rescue District personnel.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Overall satisfaction with the North Port Fire Rescue District.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

If you would like someone from the Fire Rescue District to contact you regarding the service you received, please check here. YES_____ NO _____

Incident Number _____

Date _____

APPENDIX B

**NORTH PORT FIRE RESCUE DISTRICT
DIRECTIVES**

Michael J. Auclair, Fire Chief

Directive: 01-002
Subject: Customer Service Surveys
Effective Date: January 1, 2001

The purpose of this directive is to establish a policy for distribution and receipt of customer service surveys.

1. Distribution

- a. Customer Service Surveys will be mailed to all city residents who have required emergency service for:
 - 1. Medical emergency.
 - 2. Property loss fire.
- b. The survey shall be mailed to the resident within 10 working days of the incident.
- c. Surveys will not be sent for incidents where a loss of life has occurred.

2. Collection

- a. Upon receipt of the survey, it shall be forwarded to the Deputy Chief of Operations for review and data entry.
- b. Residents wishing contact shall be contacted within 5 working days from receipt of the survey.
- c. Survey results shall be tabulated monthly and presented to the Fire Chief in the quarterly operations report.
- d. Survey results shall be forwarded to the Shift Captains monthly for distribution to the line personnel.

3. The survey shall be evaluated quarterly for:

- a. Percentage of return.
- b. Relevance of questions to current operational policies.